Sermon for 13th in Ordinary Year A

Readings: Genesis 22:1-14; Matthew 10:40-42

i

Abraham is asked to surrender to God his most precious thing. This is because the most precious is the only gift worthy of God. We cannot pay God off with second best; with what is convenient; with what is easy and comfortable. If we are serious about God, then we give everything of any worth and place it at God’s disposal. Anything less than our best and we would be better off not bothering.

The one thing Abraham can give that is dearer to him than his own life – is his son, Isaac. For Isaac represents everything that Abraham holds dear. Isaac was the reward for Abraham’s past faithfulness in leaving Haran to go to a land he did not know. Isaac represented the future hope that Abraham would one day become the father of a great nation and a blessing to all the families of the earth. Isaac makes sense of Abraham’s life. Without him, Abraham’s life would be in ruins. There is no greater sacrifice that Abraham could make. Isaac was even dearer than his own life.

We know that the Judeo-Christian tradition did not feature child sacrifice, but Abraham had no such foreknowledge. He was called by a God whose name he did not know to go to a land he could not name to become a father of a child he and Sarah were too old to have. Child sacrifice would not be so remarkable, perhaps, in that distant age. Abraham had to learn what this unseen God expected of him.

What Abraham discovered was that this God demanded faith: Absolute trust: Unswerving obedience.

“The Lord will provide,” says Abraham full of tragic irony as his young boy asks where the creature is for the sacrifice. Abraham believes Isaac is the one God is providing at this stage. This is the ultimate test of Abraham’s faith.

There is an added layer of symbolism for the later Christian reader of this story, as we note how Isaac approaches the hill of sacrifice in the company of a donkey and with wood for his own execution.

In the event, the dramatic story takes an unexpected twist for Abraham when God does indeed provide a ram caught by its horns in the undergrowth.

For Abraham, this is where the story ends, but Christians know of the even greater fulfilment of this promise when God did indeed provide a suitable sacrifice and paid the price that he spared Abraham from paying, by providing his only Son, Jesus.

This is worth taking to heart. Abraham saw only part of the picture. Often our mortal spans are too short to see the great sweep of God’s providential plans. Even when we think we have understood, often we only have a partial grasp of what God is doing. We should take some comfort in this when we feel angry with God that God is not getting on with things and we become impatient with waiting.

So what was God doing in putting Abraham through this traumatic event? What test did Abraham have to pass? Well, I believe the great test was to teach Abraham to trust God to provide. The foundation of the Abrahamic faith, fulfilled supremely in Jesus Christ, is that God will provide. Salvation does not depend on what Abraham or any other person can do, but upon what God will do. Our role as faithful followers is to learn to trust God, to believe God really will provide.

It is a surprisingly difficult lesson to learn. It’s much easier to believe in our own strength and in our own effort. It is remarkably difficult for us to live by faith and trust God to do what he has to do for us and through us.

ii

The passage from Matthew 10:40-42 adds further insight into what it means that God will provide. “Who welcomes you, welcomes me, and the one who sent me,” Jesus assures his disciples as they embark upon their missionary travels. This concept works so much more easily in societies such as first century Palestine which had a far more collective view of personality than the modern western individualism that so dominates currently.

It was taken for granted in Jesus’ society, as it still is in so many non-western societies to this day, that no individual acts in isolation, but each individual represents his or her family, tribe and ancestors. It would have been self-evident that to welcome the disciples of Jesus amounts to welcoming Jesus himself and in welcoming Jesus to any a degree at all also entails welcoming God who has sent Jesus Christ.

There is, however, a spiritual reality to this beyond the simply cultural understanding of personality. It is this aspect that will strike modern western people more in the context of our highly individualised concept of personhood. The spiritual reality being hinted at here is the promise that each Christian missionary does not go alone, but that Christ travels with those whom he sends.

Jesus has already told his disciples that they will not be immune from rejection and violence just because they go in his name, but he does promise that in their hour of need, he will give them the words they need to witness to a hostile world.

Jesus does not promise them safety from death – but he does promise that they have nothing to fear because the world can only kill the body, not the soul and Jesus assures the disciples that God has counted every hair upon their head. They are safely in God’s hands whatever their fate at the hands of the world. “Whoever loses his life for my sake, will find it,” says Jesus (v39).

Jesus sends his disciples out to witness in a dangerous world, but he is promising to provide what they need: the words, the welcome by enough people to provide them with food, clothing and lodging, and the ultimate guarantee for their immortal safety should they face the worst that the world can do to them.

Being a witness for Christ involves trusting not in our own strength, but in the willingness and ability of Christ to work through us.

iii

Those who learn how to trust God and allow the Spirit to work through them will know the greatest rewards.

The Church needs to believe she has the authority and power to go out to the world. The responsibility of the Church is to go – faithfully, dutifully, without counting the cost. The Church also needs the confidence that Christ will keep his promise to go with her and give her the words and wisdom she requires.

The responsibility for those who reject the message, or who only partially accept the message, lies at the door of the world, not the Church. The Church offers peace, but where it is rejected, it is taken back and the dust is shaken from the disciples’ feet as they move on (vv13-14). Martyrdom is not to be sought out, but faced with confidence should there be no other way. Faith cannot be by coercion, and people’s freedom to say no must be respected.

Some will accept at least some of the gospel; there will be those who accept Jesus to have been a good and wise man; they will get a commensurate reward. If you seriously believe Jesus has many good principles by which to live, that degree of faith will not be without benefit. Those who take Jesus to be a prophet, likewise, will receive appropriate reward for believing to that degree.

Anyone who responds kindly to the witnesses that go into the world in the name of Jesus in the slightest degree will receive their reward. To give as little as a cup of water to one of Jesus’ followers is as if you give it to Jesus himself.

This challenge goes both ways. It asks, as Abraham was asked before us, for absolute trust that ‘God will provide’ for those who go in his name. It also warns the world that how it responds to God’s emissaries will be noted to the smallest details, both for good and for ill.

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**August 2016**